

FORT SAN CRISTOBAL
SAN JUAN, P.R.

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
DISTRICT OF PUERTO RICO

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
INTERIOR BUILDING WASHINGTON, D.C.

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FORT SAN CRISTOBAL

San Juan, Puerto Rico

Owner: United States Government

Date of Erection: 1631 to 1783

Architect or Builder: Original designer unknown; Colonel Thomas
O'Daly for works from 1776 to 1783

Present Condition: Good

Materials of Construction: Stone

FORT SAN CRISTOBAL

San Juan, Puerto Rico

Fort San Cristobal is located in the northeastern part of town, commanding the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. For centuries it has been a bulwark of defense against the predatory raids of sea-rovers, as well as against the attacks of foreign fleets in search of territorial conquests, and, in 1898, it was from one of its batteries that the first shot was fired against the bombardment of Admiral Sampson's squadron in the Spanish-American war.

Old records mention San Cristobal Castle as early as 1521, though actual construction of it was not started until 1631. The sacking of the city by the Dutch in 1622 had demonstrated the inadequacy of the defenses provided for it, and Fort San Cristobal and the City Wall were built to remedy the situation.

Late in the eighteenth century, Spain being at war with England and attacks on the capital being expected, Colonel Thomas O'Daly, of the Royal Engineers, was ordered to proceed to San Juan and carry out the necessary improvements in the fortifications of the city. Colonel O'Daly directed the reconstruction and enlargement of Fort San Cristobal during the period from 1776 to 1783, but the English did not attack until 1797, when the troops of the Fort aided greatly in successfully repulsing the enemy forces after a two-weeks' siege.

With few changes, Fort San Cristobal remains today in the same condition. The City Wall, which formerly ran from the fort to the bay, was torn down in 1897, with great festivities to mark the expansion of the city. A gate in this wall, named "La Puerta de Santiago," was located just about to the east of the present Casino de Puerto Rico, near the Plaza de Colon (Columbus Square). The series of tunnels connecting Fort San Cristobal with El Morro, La Fortaleza, the Escambron and La Marina, having outlived their usefulness, were, shortly before the Spanish-American war, filled with debris to serve as foundations for the necessary construction called for by modern warfare.

The tunnels now used for the storage of ammunition in the Fort were used for similar purposes during the Spanish occupation and called "Santa Barbara," after the patroness saint of soldiery against explosive catastrophes. Smaller tunnels leading throughout San Cristobal and the Princesa Battery served also for the storage of ammunition and as mine galleries. At the end of these galleries there were planted barrels of powder covered with tar and connected by fuses to a central point, for emergency purposes.

It is possible that some of these "mines" are still in place, though no longer a menace.

One of the rooms in the main tunnel was used, in Spanish days, as a death cell. It is related that in this cell, some ninety years ago, there was confined a certain Captain of artillery, a sevillano by birth, condemned to death for mutiny. While awaiting "the day" for the carrying-out of the sentence, the officer, who possessed artistic inclinations, undertook to paint on the walls of the prison the likeness of seven Spanish galleons. A small ventilating shaft at the end of the room provided the only light for the artist-soldier. These paintings are well preserved to this day and are quite creditable.

The mutiny for which he had been condemned to death involved the entire garrison of Fort San Cristobal. It seems that a son having been born to the King of Spain, the soldiers had requested that one year of their service be remitted as a token of jubilation. While there must have been some precedent for their petition, the request was not granted, whereupon the entire garrison mutinied, firing upon the city until their ammunition was exhausted. The Commanding General, foreseeing an attempt by the mutineers to replenish their supply of ammunition through the tunnel from the Escambron magazines (at present used as a museum), stationed loyal troops at the end of said tunnel where they, indeed, captured the ammunition detail of the mutineers and then, going back with their prisoners, they gained access to the Fort and quickly quelled the uprising.

Possibly the most interesting of subjects in connection with San Cristobal has to do with the legend of the "Haunted Sentry Box." The story goes that, over a hundred years ago, on a certain dark and stormy night, the sentinel assigned to duty in this stern sentry-box disappeared without cause or warning, leaving his uniform behind. A sheer drop of 100 feet to the water below made escape impossible in that direction. Unable to reach an explanation, the disappearance was considered to be the work of the devil. The true, but less poetic story, as told by the late Captain Angel Rivero--last Spanish Commander of the Fort--is that the soldier deserted his post, leaving uniform and equipment behind to avoid detection, and he was located years later in a farm near Caguas.

Another interesting story connected with the Fort is that which recounts the Miracle of San Cristobal. On going down the steps into the immense cistern under the fortification, one may, with the aid of a strong flashlight, discern high up on the opposite side of the cistern what appears to be a print of Saint Christopher. This picture has played a most important part in the

history of San Juan. In the early Spanish days, Fort San Cristobal furnished a considerable part of the city's water supply. The picture of the good Saint Christopher was hung in the cistern and there was never a shortage of water. But a new priest came with new ideas. He thought Saint Christopher's picture should properly hang in the chapel of the fortress. And there it was hung. Immediately the rains stopped. The spring dried up. The cistern became empty. The devout people of San Juan fasted and prayed for rain but none came. Suddenly one night, the heavens opened and the rain fell in torrents. The next morning the soldiers, in going to their chapel, found the picture of Saint Christopher missing. A long search followed. It was at last found high up in its accustomed place on the wall of the cistern.

One other "miracle" surrounds the history of Fort San Cristobal, it being recounted as follows:

The ancient chapel of the Fort, now the barber shop of Company "D," 65th Infantry, U. S. A., was used during Sampson's bombardment of the city as a temporary storage-room for a million rounds of Mauser rifle ammunition. A shell from Sampson's fleet entered the chapel and exploded at the foot of the statue of the Virgin. The million rounds of ammunition into which the bursting shell fell were not detonated. The Spaniards believed that the watchful care of the Virgin prevented a great catastrophe.

A red X painted on the wall of the upper ramparts marks the spot where five members of the Spanish garrison were killed by a shell from Sampson's fleet.

An amusing incident of this engagement was told by Captain Rivero. During the evening prior to the bombardment of Fort San Cristobal, the American fleet anchored off San Cristobal. A sentinel posted on the upper ramparts watched their mooring rather nervously. Suddenly a great ball of light struck him. Thinking he was hit by a shell, he proceeded to fall off the wall into the moat one hundred feet below. A broken leg was the price he paid to learn the power of a modern searchlight.

Source of information: "Fort San Cristobal," Institute of Tourism, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Author: *W. Waterman*

Approved: *W*

Date: *Feb. 5. 1940*

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EL POLVORIN
(Powder Magazine)
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Owner: Department of Interior, Government of Puerto Rico

Date of Erection: About 1769

Architect: Probably Tomas O'Daly y Blake, an Irishman in
the Spanish Corps of Engineers

Builder: Probably Don Tomas O'Daly y Blake

Present Condition: Fairly good, although rain water soaks
through the walls during heavy rains

Materials of Construction: The walls are of masonry, made up
of sandstone joined by clay and
lime with scattered pieces of
brick. The roof is of brick, arch
shape in the inside and two in-
clined planes on the outside or
top.

Other Existing Records: The Historical Archive of Puerto Rico
was destroyed by fire in 1926. Doc-
uments relating to most of these
buildings may be found at Seville,
Spain, in the "Archivo de Indias."

Additional Data: The building is at present occupied by the
Museum of the Department of Agriculture
and Commerce of Puerto Rico

6/15/37

CASTILLO DE SAN CRISTOBAL

(CASTILLO SAN JUAN)

(FORT SAN CRISTOBAL)

Blvd. Norzagaray, San Juan National Historic Site

San Juan

San Juan County

Puerto Rico

ADDENDUM TO:

CASTILLO SAN JUAN

(FORT SAN CRISTOBAL)

San Juan

Puerto Rico

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